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ABSTRACT

In order to capitalize on the learning experience which adults bring to the classroom, it is necessary to identify some of the components of the self-initiated learning cycle. A study of 12 adult graduate students' learning experiences in an adult learning class was used to identify a common pattern of experience. The pattern of the learning process was a cycle involving four phases. In the first phase ("detachment"), the learner relates to experience primarily through preconceived notions. In the second ("divergence") phase, the learner departs from these preconceived notions and becomes confused; he/she tends to withdraw from others. The third ("engagement") phase is characterized by the learner being able to relax without having a solution to the confusion, leading to an intuitively-guided exploration in which decisions are made in the face of particulars rather than in the light of a preconceived plan. The learner and colleagues experience connections and insights, leading to the final "convergence" phase, which features a sudden emergence of a major insight, a new understanding, a resolution to the inquiry issue which arose in the divergence phase. This phase is characterized by excitement and intensity; it emerges from solitary reflection, but in it the learner needs to share the discovery with others whom he/she associates with the inquiry. There follows a return to the detachment phase with a new sense of experience to approach the next learning situation. In order for this learning process to be facilitated, institutions should make changes in policies for admissions processes, required courses, emphasis on performance, fixed objectives and deadlines, and lack of understanding of what is involved in an experience-related learning process. (KC)

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The Role of Adult Experience in Learning: Consequences for the Classroom *

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I am delighted to be invited to speak at a conference where the theme is "People and Community". I believe my paper demonstrates that recovery of an attention to both of these is essential in maximizing the value of our efforts as educators in institutional settings. I have also come to realize that this is an extraordinarily complex and difficult proposition. The purpose of this paper is to reveal some of the practical difficulties in integrating the experience of learners and to provoke our thinking about approaches to dealing with them.

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* A paper prepared for the Joint Conference of the Association of Community Colleges in Canada and the Canadian Vocational Association in Winnipeg, Manitoba, June 1, 1981.

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The Problem

Adult educators such as Roby Kidd (1973) and Malcolm Knowles (1970) and, long before them, E. C. Lindeman (1926) have represented for decades the importance of the experience of adult learners on the act of learning. Kidd states "...a principle factor - for some the principle factor - in adult learning is the comparatively richer experience of the adult and what use is made of this in the learning transaction." (Kidd, 1973, p. 51.)

In observing that adults are usually volunteers for learning and must see relevance of education to their own purposes, Knowles writes, "the central dynamic of the learning process is thus perceived to be the experience of the learner..." (Knowles, 1970, p. 51.) He continues, I believe rightly, to associate all this necessarily with the "locus of responsibility for learning being on the learner." (Knowles, 1970, p. 51.)

I want here to insert the notion that in working in post secondary institutions we are all working with adults. The word "adult" for me denotes a person who is capable of assuming responsibility for his/her actions. In my view, we become capable of assuming responsibility for ourselves sometime in adolescence. I am not suggesting that we actually do so! In fact, it does not surprise me that Roger Gould, an adult development theorist, finds that with some effort we may be able to say in our forties, "the life of inner-directedness finally prevails: I own myself!" (Gould, 1978, p. 309.) However, by teaching in an undergraduate university department where students range from nineteen to over fifty years, I have observed that responsibility-taking by students for their learning and work is not directly age-related. Gould also notes, "At any age, we can make the discoveries described (as midlife challenges) and find a

burst of vitality." (Gould, 1978, p. 319.) I do believe that readiness and willingness to assume responsibility for one's involvement has to do with one's past experience, especially the immediate past. It is highly related to what one has become accustomed to and what one has come to expect. As an exaggerated example from a group leadership course this year, I had two students working in an institutional residential setting with seniors who steadfastly refused to make any of their own program plans,while another student working with a group of late adolescents found that these people very quickly assumed responsibility for planning, implementation and evaluating their own coffee house project.

Let us return to the question of our classrooms, laboratories and educational settings. I will represent the point of view that the worth of our efforts as educators must be considered in the light of what people are actually learning and what they will carry with them into their lives and work. For me, public education is not primarily an art form though, at its best, it is fine craft. Rather, I consider it a practical and urgent social necessity. I will further contend, along with educators such as Knowles and Kidd that this does not occur without learners being able to relate to activities and topics in the light of their own experience. Since, as an instructor, I have no direct access to the learner's experience and have utterly no control over what (s)he will do with the learning afterwards, the learner must be vocal, initiating, and willing to assume some responsibility in the process. In short, I believe that the quality of post secondary education is, to a great extent, contingent on the degree to which students are purposeful and responsibility-taking. The alternatives is an enormous waste of time, energy and material resources. The seriousness of the concern of

integrating adult experience in the classroom does not begin with the appearance of a few "older adults" in our classes.

I believe this poses a tremendous difficulty for us in institutional settings. Of the writers in my field of adult education, Knowles has addressed himself most directly and prolifically to the practical problems of instructors and educators with respect to working with people taking responsibility for their learning. He describes a seven-step "andrologogical process" including such dimensions as climate setting, participative planning, diagnosis of needs, etc. (Knowles, 1970, p. 54.) Certainly I know educators and learners who have found his work illuminating and practically useful, as have I. However, I also agree with William Torbert who cited Knowles as an example of "most contemporary discussion of experiential education (which) overlooks the scale of....difficulties (associated with it)." (Torbert, 1978). My own view is that we require a deeper understanding of ourselves and others as persons who are trying to initiate our own direction, and a more refined understanding of the impact of institutional organizations,practices and relationships on this effort.

Through discussion of a piece of research I have completed I propose to identify some of the concrete and considerable problems involved in integrating experience of responsibility-taking learners in institutional settings and a ground for dealing with them.

Results of a Study

In the fall of 1976, Heather Bates, a colleague, and I, had the privilege of listening to twelve different adult learners in individual interviews every week describe their experiences in a rather extraordinary graduate class. The course called "Basic Processes of Facilitating Adult Learning" was instructed by Dr. Virginia Griffin who certainly accounted for dimensions Knowles mentions and choreographed them into what could only be described as an elegant improvisational dance. The learning activities and topics emerged beautifully out of the interests of leaners who eventually developed their own individual learning projects and also participated in planning the class sessions.

The learners interviewed ranged in age from 24 to 50 years. All were social professionals (librarians, social workers, consultants and the like) who had already at least one university degree. All had chosen to take the course knowing its reputation for being a "significant learning event" and all had volunteered to be interviewed. One might expect that these highly educated people who chose to study not only adult education but also how they might "facilitate" instead of "teach", would easily assume the role of responsible learners. Not true!

After one and a half years mulling over some sixteen hundred pages of transcription from these "open-ended" interviews with eight of the twelve learners, I was able to identify a common pattern of experience among these learners. *

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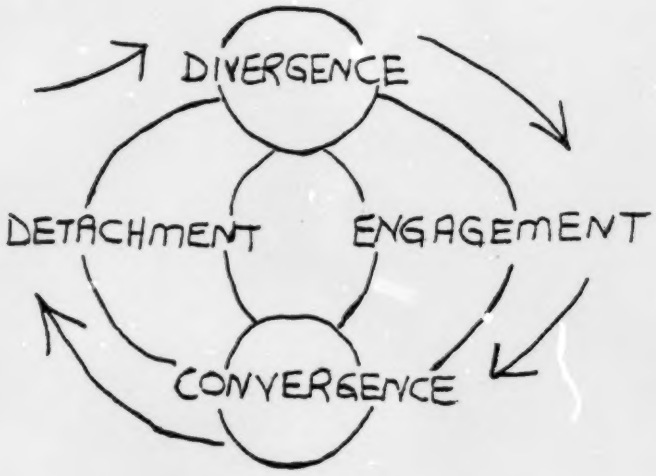
* The methodology of the study which is more intricate than is portrayed here, is described fully in my thesis completed in 1979.

I later came to understand this pattern, which I will describe momentarily, to be a representation of a learning process, a perspective change process, toward greater responsibility taking. Specifically, learners were coming to understand themselves as responsible agents in their own learning, to regard learning, teaching and knowledge in a totally different light.

The pattern of this process which I was able to discern was an apparently cyclical configuration of four qualitatively different seasons of learning. The sequence is discernable by the consistent order in which the phases occur and by what eventually becomes a noticeable theme or pivotal concern (in this case, the nature of learning, knowledge and teaching). I called these seasons "Divergence", "Engagement", "Convergence" and "Detachment" and visually represented them as shown here:

Figure 1:



Though I would consider the learning process to "begin" with the divergence phase, it is precipitated out of a season of detachment which in this study had a tone of anticipation.

The key descriptor of the detachment phase is the word, "fit". The learner is, thematically, in an observing stance during which (s)he is able to fit his/her experiences into existing conceptual categories. As people entered the course, attention was directed to confirming and/or denying expectations. This is typified by the following comment: "For me the structure and organization and presentation that (the instructor) made, made sense, and was clarifying....fit in with what I expected." "Detachment" does not signify lack of interest or uninvolvement in activity but rather that the learner relates to experience primarily through preconceived notions.

The learning process begins with the collapse of the learner's frame of reference as an adequate means for understanding his/her experience. This new phase of the process I have called "divergence" since the learner's experience diverges or "veers away" from existing conceptual frameworks and expectations. Where the key descriptor with detachment phase was "fit", for the divergence phase, it would be "nonfit with a whole lot of discomfort". One learner reported that "nothing was clicking" and that "the course was not going in a direction which suited (her)". The phase is characterized by confusion and a pre-occupying crisis of confidence accompanied by sometimes intense anxiety. The social pattern during this phase is one of withdrawal or "distancing" of self from others perceived to be associated with the source of confusion, "a tendency to pull back", as one learner put it. People reported reduced communication with others and some eclipse or distortion of perception. "I realized that when I'm in a bad mood I

totally misinterpret what people are feeling... what is happening in the class", reported one person. This phase can be prolonged by denial of this confusion. When this occurred, there were instances of growing antagonism and competition in relation to others. There is a tendency to find fault with others for the discomfort and/or to blame one's self. Two related and possibly simultaneous events are critical to the learner moving out of the divergence phase. One is being able to name the source of confusion in a way that relates to him/herself without a tone of personal inadequacy. The other is establishing an affirming contact with others associated with that source of confusion.

The engagement phase is characterized by the learner being able to relax without having a solution to the issue. What follows is an intuitively-guided exploration in which decisions are made in the face of particulars rather than in the light of a preconceived plan. At this point there is no coherent perspective which "fits" the experience but the learner is prepared to go with the experience and is able to do so without the discomfort of the divergence phase. One person described this as being able to "throw away all assumptions and presuppositions and be sort of free-floating". An outstanding feature of this phase is a series of collaborative insight occasions or "convergence episodes", as I have called them. There is a convergence, a coming together, of the learner with colleagues simultaneous with the creation of connections between experience and concepts, the creation of insights. One learner described it as "the head and the experience coming together." These occasions were reported to be characterized by "a combination of comfort and excitement" in relationships with others who were able to be "supportive and confrontive" at the same time. The importance of these occasions to the learning

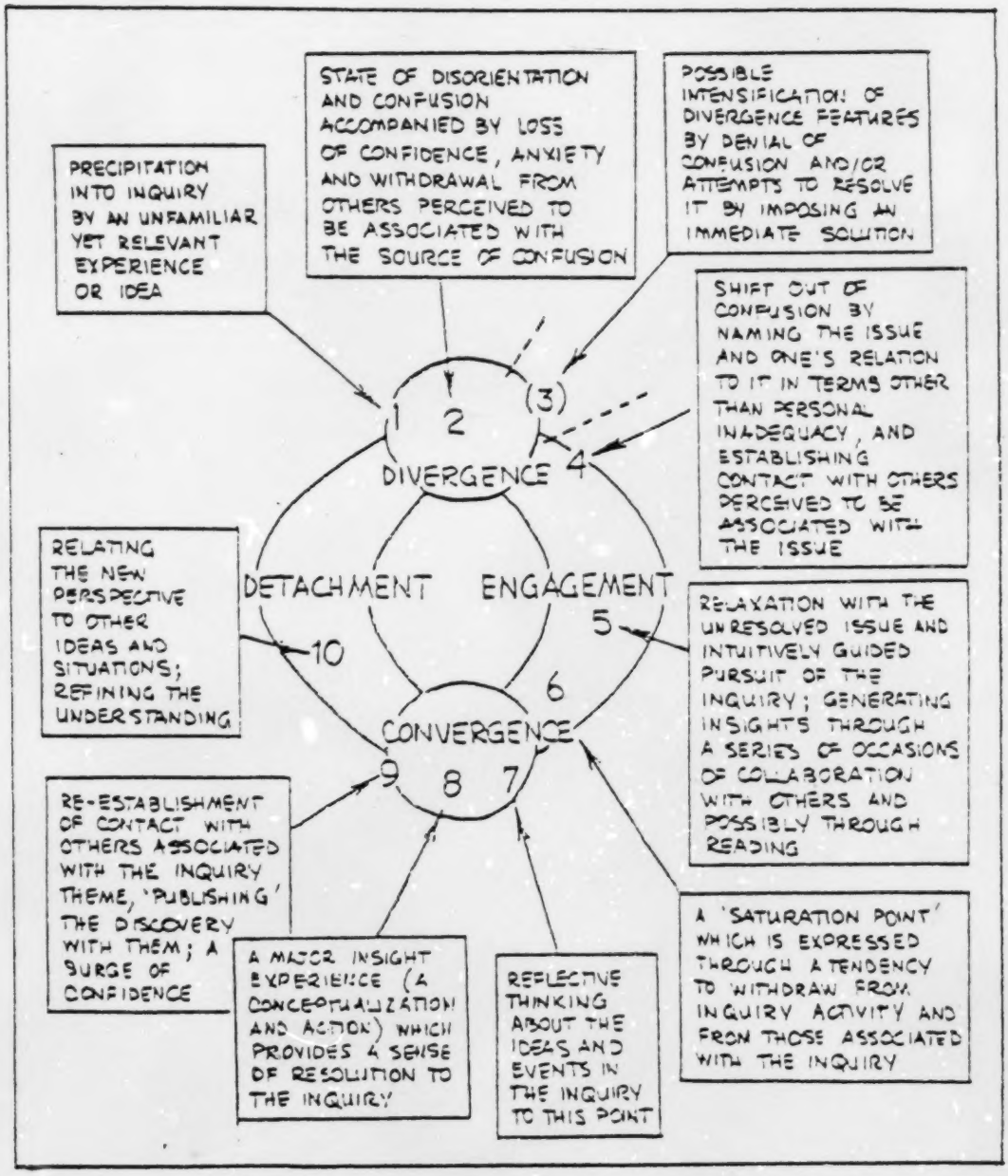
process seems evidenced by the fact that, where the classroom did not afford these collaborative inquiry opportunities, learners created them outside the classroom. "I have to have that interpersonal bouncing of ideas to make it real" said one person. Another reported these experiences to be enabling him to find ways to express what he had not been able to verbalize before. Insights and confidence derived from these episodes are gathered to a point of apparent saturation, a plateau, experienced by the learner in response to which (s)he tends to withdraw from both inquiry activity and other persons. This signals the close of the engagement phase.

The convergence phase features a rather sudden emergence of a major insight, a new understanding, a sense of resolution to the inquiry issue which arose in the divergence phase. This understanding is represented in a new conceptualization and is reflected in a novel action approach adopted by the learner. The tone of experience during this phase is one of tremendous excitement and intensity. One learner noted dramatic physical reactions (such as sensations of a swelling in the chest) and several described a kind of heightened consciousness (such as being aware of awareness). An extraordinary sense of clarity and perspective on issues of concern during prior phases of inquiry gives the learner a strong sense of confidence and satisfaction. The events of this convergence phase occur when the learner is withdrawn from others. The major insight or synthesis emerges out of some form of solitary reflection (such as journal writing or reviewing of notes). However, movement out of this phase does not seem to occur until the learner has been able to share the discovery with others whom (s)he associates with the inquiry.

With this last act to provide a sense of completion, the learner returns to the detachment phase stance, this time with a tone of consolidation to the experience rather than of anticipation as at the outset. The learner elaborates and refines the new understanding through relating it to other ideas and through applying it to other situations. The learner again relates to experience <u>through</u> a pre-conceived frame of reference, this time through the new perspective. (S)he is no longer directly and intensively involved with others as far as this particular theme is concerned. Rather, relationships with others tend to be in the light of preconceived purposes. One person commented, "we all had private agendas that didn't mesh very well." He contrasted this with an earlier period (engagement phase) when "there seemed to be interweaving patterns or lines so we could work on all three of our interests at the same time."

What an extraordinary multitude of things going on "within" people. Let me remind you that these were <u>common patterns of experience</u>. While each learner had his/her own pace and timing through the sequence, each of the following points seemed critical to moving on in the sequence. (I should add that, by the conclusion of the interviews, three had moved through the entire sequence and all but one person reached the engagement phase.)

FIGURE 2. Critical Points in the Learning Process


PRECIPITATION INTO INQUIRY BY AN UNFAMILIAR YET RELEVANT EXPERIENCE OR IDEA
STATE OF DISORIENTATION AND CONFUSION ACCOMPANIED BY LOSS OF CONFIDENCE, ANXIETY AND WITHDRAWAL FROM OTHERS PERCEIVED TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH THE SOURCE OF CONFUSION
POSSIBLE INTENSIFICATION OF DIVERGENCE FEATURES BY DENIAL OF CONFUSION AND/OR ATTEMPTS TO RESOLVE IT BY IMPOSING AN IMMEDIATE SOLUTION
SHIFT OUT OF CONFUSION BY NAMING THE ISSUE AND ONE'S RELATION TO IT IN TERMS OTHER THAN PERSONAL INADEQUACY, AND ESTABLISHING CONTACT WITH OTHERS PERCEIVED TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH THE ISSUE
1
2
(3)
4
DIVERGENCE
DETACHMENT
ENGAGEMENT
5
RELAXATION WITH THE UNRESOLVED ISSUE AND INTUITIVELY GUIDED PURSUIT OF THE INQUIRY; GENERATING INSIGHTS THROUGH A SERIES OF OCCASIONS OF COLLABORATION WITH OTHERS AND POSSIBLY THROUGH READING
RELATING THE NEW PERSPECTIVE TO OTHER IDEAS AND SITUATIONS; REFINING THE UNDERSTANDING
10
6
CONVERGENCE
9
8
7
A 'SATURATION POINT' WHICH IS EXPRESSED THROUGH A TENDENCY TO WITHDRAW FROM INQUIRY ACTIVITY AND FROM THOSE ASSOCIATED WITH THE INQUIRY
RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF CONTACT WITH OTHERS ASSOCIATED WITH THE INQUIRY THEME, 'PUBLISHING' THE DISCOVERY WITH THEM; A SURGE OF CONFIDENCE
A MAJOR INSIGHT EXPERIENCE (A CONCEPTUALIZATION AND ACTION) WHICH PROVIDES A SENSE OF RESOLUTION TO THE INQUIRY
REFLECTIVE THINKING ABOUT THE IDEAS AND EVENTS IN THE INQUIRY TO THIS POINT

Consequences for Educators in Institutional Settings

Before beginning, let me say that this conceptual representation of a learning process from the standpoint of the learner is based on the experiences of people learning to take responsibility for their learning. I would expect that students in your classes faced with an emergent course design would experience a similar process. I am finding, not surprisingly, that this schema represents life change experience through which people come to see themselves "more in the driver's seat", as it were. While I have only begun to study other kinds of courses from the learner's point of view, over time, I believe that aspects of this representation will be found applicable particularly where there is an effort to integrate the learner's experience in some way. It may be useful to think about what you would hear if your students were describing their experience in your courses and programs. Do the courses and programs you administer and/or instruct typically precipitate the beginning of this learning process (disorientation and confusion) with respect to either an unfamiliar content or a novel approach to teaching? In my own department, I suspect our introductory course throws people into confusion as a beginning to learning an experience-based approach to instruction. Then, while the teaching/learning approach becomes understood, students enter a seminar course in group leadership, which I instruct, and are generally precipitated into another 'round' as a result of an actual experience in a leadership field project. Do your courses and programs 'pick up' on problems and issues generated in the experience of learners outside the class, and provide a forum for mutual exploration? I instruct an adult development course through taking an autobiographical approach in relating to theory. Students

find collaborative exploration of their own life experience to be a tremendously energizing and illuminating way to learn changes in adulthood. Do your courses provide a reflective "moment" through which people are able to evolve their own strong synthesis, a qualitatively new understanding of something? To what extent do you depend on three quarters of this process having taken place prior to the program or course which is aimed primarily at consolidating or elaborating an existing understanding?

Now let us turn to the difficulties of integrating the learner's experience into educational events in institutional settings. I will draw my points from this conceptual representation of an experience based learning process. I have about eight. I'm sure that from your own experience you will be able to add items in the discussion which follows.

The following eight points consist simultaneously as conditions "within" the learner and in the educational context. It is the relationship between both learner and milieu which makes possible this process.

1. <u>The learning event must be experienced as a voluntary act by the learner.</u> Paradoxically, one must take the responsibility to learn to become more responsible or probably almost anything for that matter. They'll write your exams and do your assignments but they won't learn for themselves unless they want to. The disorienting experience must be not only unfamiliar but <u>relevant</u>! People will not take personal risks and bear the discomfort of disruption for reasons that are only apparent to someone else.

<u>Practical Problems for Institutions</u>:

. Limited learning is likely in courses or programs that are

compulsory or have only extrinsic rewards (e.g. manpower cheques) for people, unless an interviewing event prior or during the event attains ownership for participation.

. Limited learning is likely for people who never feel they're choosing anything. Present admissions procedures probably don't deal with this. In fact, the more depersonalized the admissions procedure the more feelings of helplessness are encouraged and augmented.

2. It has to be okay to be confused. If this kind of experience-based learning process is to begin within the educational setting, students must be able to allow themselves to be confused. An educational environment which accepts, indeed expects and supports this, is probably not sufficient condition but would seem to be a necessary one.

Problems for Institutions:

. Students in the midst of confusion can hardly be expected to produce good work if their confusion on the topic falls inconveniently on top of assignment deadlines! Part of supporting people at this point is some form of reciprocity between the institution and the students! This implies a form of trust between students and teachers.

3. It must be possible to be open to and receive affirmation from significant others, one of whom may be you as the instructor. In order to move out of confusion students have to be able to acknowledge it and, with affirmation from others perceived to be knowledgeable, name the source of confusion. Some people find it impossible to embrace their own confusion. Sometimes this is situational (e.g., when people are under tremendous stress in other quarters in their life). It is also probable that there are people who generally find

it impossible to tolerate this much ambiguity.

Problems for Institutions:

- Instructors and other potential significant others (e.g., more 'senior' students) must be available to students informally, and with alertness, a lot of 'reserve energy' and willingness to live through some 'dumping'. I find that often the students who need my affirmation the most are the most aggravating.
- Instructors have to have ways of replenishing themselves. About the third and fourth weeks in a course which precipitates a divergence experience is especially draining.

4. Students and teachers must come to understand, trust and work with intuition. At some point it has to be okay to plunge in without a plan. Don't ask people for learning objectives before they have had a chance to explore the dimensions of the experience. One student in my study threw himself into an extra couple of weeks of confusion by trying to "frame out a reasonable workload" prematurely. As far as understanding and having to use intuition, let me refer you to Marge Denis' session tomorrow.

Problems for Institutions:

- Instructors must be able to trust that students "know more than they can tell" as Michael Polanyi (1967) says. This, too, implies some form of trust in relationships with students and in the process.
- Somehow, students have to feel "out from under" the threat of capricious evaluation. (I do a lot of "second chances" on assignments, and jointly designed and evaluated assignments.)

5. Students must be able to initiate collaborative relationships with others with whom they can exchange on complementary or similar questions and searches. People in my study went outside the classroom to find this when the classroom environment was too threatening. Even for this, students have to know others and be around them.

Problems for Institutions:

- Students who attend on a part-time basis and through distance learning programs probably find this difficult if not impossible. (Dr. Miriam Hutton from University of Manitoba here has developed an approach of distance learning involving small inquiry groups.) Even for full-time students, there is typically little initiated by institutions to promote friendships among students within classes or in programs as a whole to the extent that it is needed for their learning process to occur.
- Many people are limited by their lack of experience in working and learning collaboratively with others.

6. Learners must withdraw from busy activity and find time to reflect in solitude.

Problems for Institutions:

- Reflection is not only emotionally challenging for some people but also, in some cases, seems to be a capability that requires development.
- Often written work can be an occasion which promotes reflection if a debilitating concern for performance can be reduced. However, I find that near the end of term when retrospective reflection is most likely to occur, students are often deluged by assignments and exams and relaxed reflective activity gets crowded out.

7. It is important for learners to evolve their own versions of a new understanding in their own time and for this discovery to matter to someone else. We are accustomed to being organized around conceptual material or preconceived methodological approaches which learners come to acquire. Evolving an integrated novel understanding requires something of a re-invention of the wheel, something which, again, seems to energize, to some extent, in its own time.

Problems for Institutions:

- The language and timing of learners' new understanding are bound to be somewhat idiosyncratic. As a creative act, this kind of learning is incompatible with specific preset performance objectives and fixed deadlines. This kind of learning can be nurtured but not forced.
- The external manifestations of dramatic inner events can be very subtle. Again, it is important for learners to be in relationships with the instructor and other possible 'significant others' so that their important discoveries can be recognized and their excitement shared. Time, presence of mind, and energy for enthusiastic response to people's creative achievements are vital but sometimes rare in busy departments. It is easy to be pressured to "get the grades in" rather than take the time to value a students heartfelt expression of an important educational experience.

The above points do not exhaust the survey of institutional incompatibilities with experience-related learning. They do suggest, I think, that if we hope to make space in our institutions for experience-related learning, we must confront and develop creative alternatives to the following:

- admissions and registration processes through which people who have no interest in programs find themselves there.
- curricula which do not have the commitment of interest by students.
- norms and attitudes which, with an emphasis on performance and decorum, do not allow for confusion, frustration, lack of confidence.
- fixed performance objectives and deadlines.
- instances of social isolation among students.
- lack of time, energy and reward for instructors to give adequate attention to students and their work.
- lack of understanding and skill by both students and instructors for some aspects of what is involved in an experience-related learning process.

Sounds astronomical and in a sense it is. However, I am reminded of a thought conveyed to me recently by my friend Luis Morfin Lopez. He said, in a Mexican accent: If I ask you would you eat an elephant today, you would say "no". But if I ask you if you would eat an elephant in two years, you might say "maybe"!!